

## **Day 4: Informed Consumption of Evidence**

Evidence synthesis: *Systematic reviews and meta-analyses*

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Sebastian Ramirez-Ruiz  
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## Raise your hand if you:

- have heard the terms narrative review, systematic review, or meta-analysis
- can define what a systematic review entails
- can explain the difference between a narrative review and a systematic review
- have ever conducted a systematic review or meta-analysis
- have combined evidence from multiple studies in your work
- have interpreted findings from a meta-analytic study
- have used evidence synthesis to inform policy decisions
- are familiar with the steps involved in conducting a systematic review
- have critiqued or evaluated a meta-analysis study
- have integrated findings from systematic reviews into policy recommendations
- have trained or guided others in evidence synthesis methodologies
- have read a systematic review or meta-analysis in the past six months

# The knowledge cummulation challenge

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## Motivation

Understand whether freedom of the press fosters better government.

## Evidence

Experiment that shows that voters are more likely to vote against politicians when they learn that the politicians are underperforming

## What can you learn?

Source ([Humphreys and Scacco, 2020](#))

## Motivation

Understand whether larger endowments of natural resources weaken state-society linkages.

## Evidence

Experiment that shows that voters who are told that revenues are derived from natural resources – rather than taxes – exhibit less concern about government expenditures

## What can you learn?

Source ([Humphreys and Scacco, 2020](#))

## Motivation

Understand whether inter-ethnic violence is caused by residential segregation.

## Evidence

Experiment that shows that prejudice decreases among individuals exposed to higher levels of contact with out-group members.

## What can you learn?

Source ([Humphreys and Scacco, 2020](#))

## Challenge to knowledge cumulation

In all three cases, a *macro-level question motivates the research, but the researcher has micro-level experimental evidence at hand*. The micro-level experiments seem to provide relevant evidence, but it is unclear what inferences to draw from this micro evidence for the macro questions.

## Challenges to studying the "macro"

- Suitable research designs
- Resource constraints
- Professional incentives (*one-time hitters problem*)
- ...

## Think of validity concerns from previous sessions

- Balance between the internally and externally valid...

# Causal decision-making and causal effect estimation...

  
<http://pubsonline.informs.org/journal/ijds>

**INFORMS JOURNAL ON DATA SCIENCE**  
Vol. 1, No. 1, April–June 2022, pp. 4–16  
ISSN 2694-4022 (print), ISSN 2694-4030 (online)

## Causal Decision Making and Causal Effect Estimation Are Not the Same ... and Why It Matters

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<https://doi.org/10.1287/ijds.2021.0006>  
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**Abstract.** Causal decision making (CDM) at scale has become a routine part of business, and increasingly, CDM is based on statistical models and machine learning algorithms. Businesses algorithmically target offers, incentives, and recommendations to affect consumer behavior. Recently, we have seen an acceleration of research related to CDM and causal effect estimation (CEE) using machine-learned models. This article highlights an important perspective: CDM is not the same as CEE, and counterintuitively, accurate CEE is not necessary for accurate CDM. Our experience is that this is not well understood by practitioners or most researchers. Technically, the estimand of interest is different, and this has important implications both for modeling and for the use of statistical models for CDM. We draw on recent research to highlight three implications. (1) We should carefully consider the objective function of the causal machine learning, and if possible, optimize for accurate “treatment assignment” rather than for accurate effect-size estimation. (2) Confounding affects CDM and CEE differently. The upshot here is that for supporting CDM it may be just as good or even better to learn with confounded data as with unconfounded data. (3) Causal statistical modeling may not be necessary at all to support CDM because a proxy target for statistical modeling might do as well or better. This third observation helps to explain at least one broad common CDM practice that seems “wrong” at first blush—the widespread use of noncausal models for targeting interventions. The last two implications are particularly important in practice, as acquiring (unconfounded) data on both “sides” of the counterfactual for modeling can be quite costly and often impractical. These observations open substantial research ground. We hope to facilitate research in this area by pointing to related articles from multiple contributing fields, most of them written in the last five years.

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History: Nick Street served as the senior editor for this article.  
Data Ethics & Reproducibility Note: The code capsule is available on Code Ocean at <https://doi.org/10.24433/CO.3696500.v1> and in the e-Companion to this article (available at <https://doi.org/10.1287/ijds.2021.0006>).

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**Keywords:** causal inference • treatment effect estimation • treatment assignment policy

Source ([Fernández-Loría and Provost, 2022](#))

## Let's pick sides:

Turn to the person right next to you. The person whose birthday is the closest to today will stand for *Premise A*.

- **Activity:**

You have just been assigned to one of two premises to defend, regardless of your personal views. You will need to construct a coherent argument and anticipate counterarguments.

- **Argument Construction** (3 minutes)

- A clear thesis statement.
- Three supporting points.
- Acknowledgment of potential counterarguments and responses to them.

- **Discuss and try to convince each other** (7 minutes)



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- **Premise A:**

Policymakers should focus on **what works**, prioritizing effective outcomes over understanding the underlying reasons.

- **Premise B:**

Policymakers should care about **why something works**, as understanding the underlying reasons can lead to more sustainable and adaptable policies.

# **Overview of evidence synthesis**

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Why should we care about evidence synthesis?



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- Evidence synthesis involves *combining information from multiple studies investigating the same topic* to comprehensively understand their findings.



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- Synthesis can help determine the **current state of affairs** in a research field's conceptualization of an issue, how **effective** a particular intervention is.



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- Synthesis can help determine the **current state of affairs** in a research field's conceptualization of an issue, how **effective** a particular intervention is.
- It is very **popular** in evidence-based health practice.



**Who can benefit from evidence synthesis?**





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- **Researchers and funders** who need information about the *gaps* in the evidence, helping to direct future research efforts and funding priorities.



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- **Policymakers and administrators** who need information to *make decisions*, ensuring policies are based on the *best available* evidence.
- **Policy practitioners** who need information about *implementation*, ensuring policies are effectively put into practice..
- **General public** who stand to benefit from **well-informed** policies that are designed to improve societal outcomes based on robust evidence.

# Types of evidence synthesis

## Narrative reviews

Summarize and interpret the literature on a particular topic.

- **Purpose:** To present a comprehensive overview and insights based on the author's expertise.
- **Strengths:**
  - Broad overview of the topic
  - Flexible and easy to consume
- **Limitations:**
  - Lack of reproducibility
  - Prone to author bias



Source (Grossman, 2022)

## Systematic reviews

Uses a structured and predefined methodology to gather and analyze all relevant studies on a specific research question.

- **Purpose:** To minimize bias and provide high-quality evidence by synthesizing all available research.
- **Strengths:**
  - Comprehensive and transparent
  - Reproducible and less biased
- **Limitations:**
  - Resource-intensive
  - Subject to available materials (i.e., publication bias)

**nature human behaviour** 

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01460-1>

**Article**

**A systematic review of worldwide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy**

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Received: 1 December 2021 Accepted: 16 September 2022 Published online: 7 November 2022 

Philipp Lorenz-Spreen  <sup>1,5</sup>, Lisa Oswald  <sup>2,6</sup>, Stephan Lewandowsky  <sup>3,4</sup> & Ralph Hertwig 

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One of today's most controversial and consequential issues is whether the global uptake of digital media is causally related to a decline in democracy. We conducted a systematic review of causal and correlational evidence ( $N = 496$  articles) on the link between digital media use and different political variables. Some associations, such as increasing political participation and information consumption, are likely to be beneficial for democracy and were often observed in autocracies and emerging democracies. Other associations, such as declining political trust, increasing populism and growing polarization, are likely to be detrimental to democracy and were more pronounced in established democracies. While the impact of digital media on political systems depends on the specific variable and system in question, several variables show clear directions of associations. The evidence calls for research efforts and vigilance by governments and civil societies to better understand, design and regulate the interplay of digital media and democracy.

The ongoing heated debate on the opportunities and dangers that digital media pose to democracy has been hampered by disjointed and conflicting results (for recent overviews, see refs.<sup>1–4</sup>). Disagreement about the role of new media is not a novel phenomenon; throughout history, evolving communication technologies have provoked concerns and debates. One likely source of concern is the dual-use dilemma, that is, the inescapable fact that technologies can be used for both noble and malicious aims. For instance, during the Second World War, radio was used as a propaganda tool by Nazi Germany<sup>5</sup>, whereas allied radio, such as the BBC, supported resistance against the Nazi regime for example by providing facts.

Digital media appears to be another double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can empower citizens, as demonstrated in movements such as the Arab Spring<sup>6</sup>, Fridays for Future and #MeToo<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, digital media can also be instrumental in inciting destructive behaviours and tendencies such as polarization and populism<sup>8</sup>, as well as fatal events such as the attack on the United States Capitol in January 2021. Relatedly, the way political leaders use or avoid digital media can vary greatly depending on the political context. Former US President Trump used it to spread numerous lies ranging from claims about systematic voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election to claims about the harmfulness of Covid-19 in early 2022. Russian President

Source (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023)

# Types of evidence synthesis

## Meta-analyses

A type of systematic review that uses statistical methods to combine the results of multiple studies.

- **Purpose:** To increase statistical power and resolve uncertainties when individual studies disagree.
- **Strengths:**
  - Provides pooled estimates of effects
  - Identifies patterns and overall trends
- **Limitations:**
  - Requires high-quality data (Garbage-in/garbage-out)
  - Heterogeneity among studies can complicate analysis

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1843572>

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group

 Check for updates

**Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Voting Advice Applications**

Simon Munzert  and Sebastian Ramirez-Ruiz 

Data Science Lab, Hertie School, Berlin, Germany

**ABSTRACT**  
We review the influence of voting advice applications (VAAs) on three core outcomes: turnout, vote choice, and issue knowledge. In a meta-analysis of 55 effects reported in 22 studies, comprising 73,673 participants in 9 countries, we find strong evidence for positive effects of VAA usage on reported turnout ( $OR = 1.87$ ; 95% CI = [1.50, 2.33]) and vote choice ( $OR = 1.44$ ; 95% CI = [1.16, 1.78]) as well as modest evidence on knowledge increase (partial correlation = 0.09; 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.18]). At the same time, we observe large heterogeneity in effect sizes, for which study design turns out to be a key driver. Effects are substantively weaker in causally more rigorous experimental studies. We highlight the need for more well-powered experimental research as well as studies focusing on the acquisition of knowledge in VAA usage.

**KEYWORDS**  
Meta-analysis; VAA; voting advice application; effect; impact; turnout; vote choice; issue knowledge; heterogeneity

**Introduction**  
The vision of the internet as a liberating tool for global citizenship has been severely battered. Once praised as a savior for deliberative democracy (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Gummel, 2001), it is now seen by many as one of its biggest challenges (Settle, 2018; Sunstein, 2007). However, in times of rampant misinformation and powerful partisan media online, voting advice applications (VAAs) testify to the empowering capabilities of digital tools. Aside from the informational benefits of these voter guides, many studies have suggested sizable effects on political participation and vote choice.  
The body of evidence about the effects of VAAs on political behavior has been growing quickly. In this note, we present the first quantitative review of VAA effects on individual turnout, vote choice, and accumulation of issue knowledge. Summarizing 55 effects from 22 studies covering over 73,673 participants and 25 elections in 9 countries, our analysis substantively extends the body of evidence from previous qualitative reviews of the VAA effects literature (Garzia, 2010; Garzia & Marshall, 2012). Using cross-classified random-

Source (Munzert and Ramirez-Ruiz, 2021)

# **Narrative reviews: A primer**

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## What is a narrative review?

A narrative review is a comprehensive, qualitative summary of research on a specific topic, typically based on a non-systematic search and selection of studies, providing a broader understanding through descriptive synthesis.

## Key characteristics of a systematic review

- Broad *topic scope* allowing for flexibility in including relevant studies
- Selective *literature inclusion* based on the author's expertise and perspective
- Focus on *summarizing and synthesizing* existing knowledge rather than systematic data extraction
- Emphasis on *contextualizing findings* within a theoretical or conceptual framework
- Narrative *discussion* that highlights trends, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature

# Narrative review (cont.)

The image shows the cover of an academic article. At the top left is the logo for 'ANNUAL REVIEWS' with a stylized 'A' and 'R'. To the right is the title 'Annual Review of Political Science' in bold. Below it is the specific article title 'Media and Policy Making in the Digital Age'. Underneath the title is the author's name, 'Emiliano Grossman'. Below the author's name is a small block of text indicating his affiliation: 'Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, Sciences Po, Paris, France; email: emiliano.grossman@sciencespo.fr'. On the left side of the cover, there is a section titled 'ANNUAL REVIEWS CONNECT' with a left-pointing arrow. It lists several features: 'Download figures', 'Navigate cited references', 'Keyword search', 'Explore related articles', and 'Share via email or social media'. At the bottom left of the cover, there is some technical information: 'Annu. Rev. Political Sci. 2022. 25:443–61', 'First published as a Review in Advance on February 3, 2022', 'The Annual Review of Political Science is online at polisci.annualreviews.org', and a DOI link 'https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-103422'. There is also a note about copyright and license: 'Copyright © 2022 by Annual Reviews. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See credit lines of images or other third-party material in this article for license information'. At the very bottom left is an 'OPEN ACCESS' logo with a CC BY symbol.

**Keywords**  
media, policy making, political competition, mediatization, social media

**Abstract**  
Do media influence policy making? To what extent can governments or other actors manipulate this influence? Our understanding of the relationship between media and policy making remains limited, as separate research agendas look at parts of the puzzle in public policy, political communication, and related fields. This article tries to bridge these divides, to show how knowledge from different fields may be complementary, and to point to shortcomings and blind spots in existing research. By bringing different strands together, I show that media, old and new, are the main arena for the battle over the scope of policy conflict. The review discusses different factors determining or influencing media coverage of and influence on policy making, before looking at how governments and administrations deal with media coverage of policy making. I explore how ongoing changes in the media landscape are likely to affect the media–policy making nexus. The final section presents future research directions.

# **Systematic reviews: A primer**

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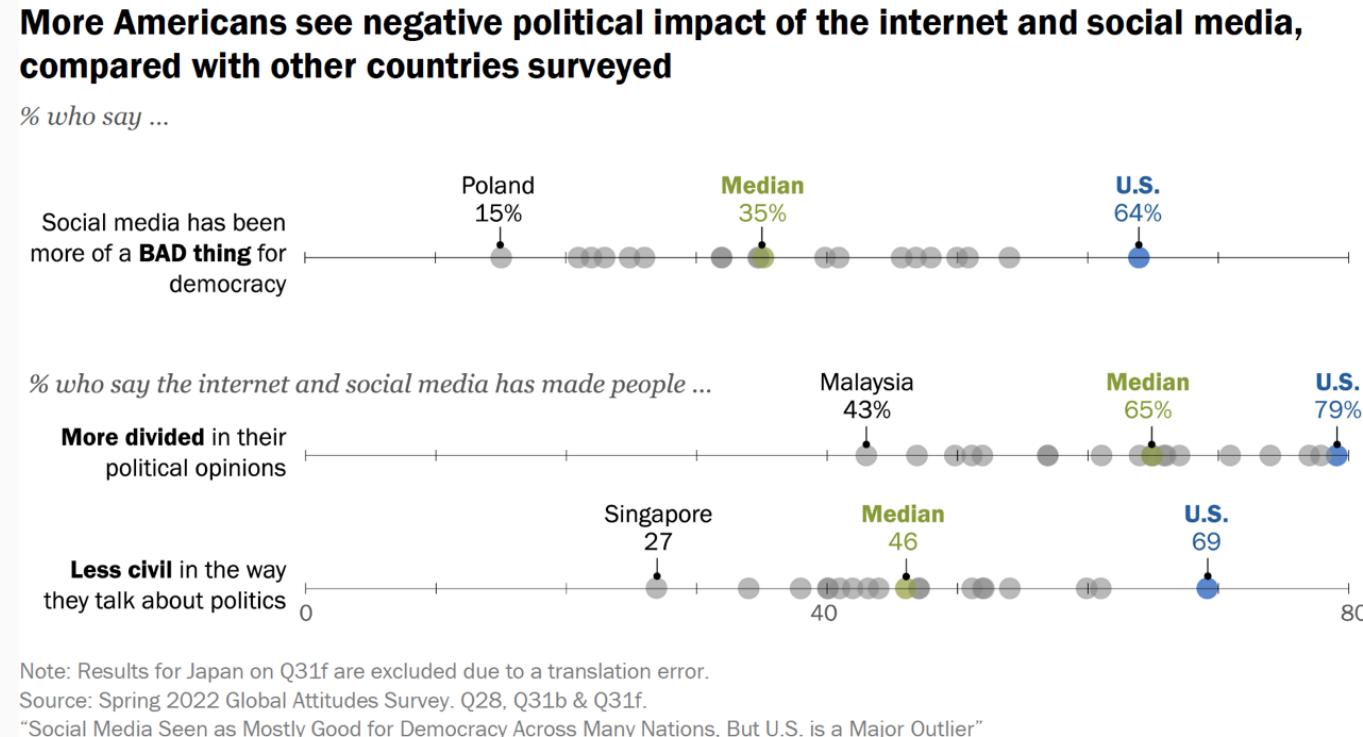
## What is a systematic review?

A review that is conducted according to clearly stated, scientific research methods, and is designed to minimize biases and errors inherent to traditional, narrative reviews.

## Key characteristics of a systematic review

- Clearly stated *objectives*
- Comprehensive *search strategy* to retrieve relevant studies (both *published* and *unpublished*)
- Explicit criteria for the *inclusion* or exclusion of the retrieved studies
- Clear *presentation of characteristics* of the studies included and an analysis of methodological quality
- Comprehensive overview of all studies excluded and *justification for exclusion*

# Systematic review (cont.)



nature human behaviour 

Article <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01460-1>

## A systematic review of worldwide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy

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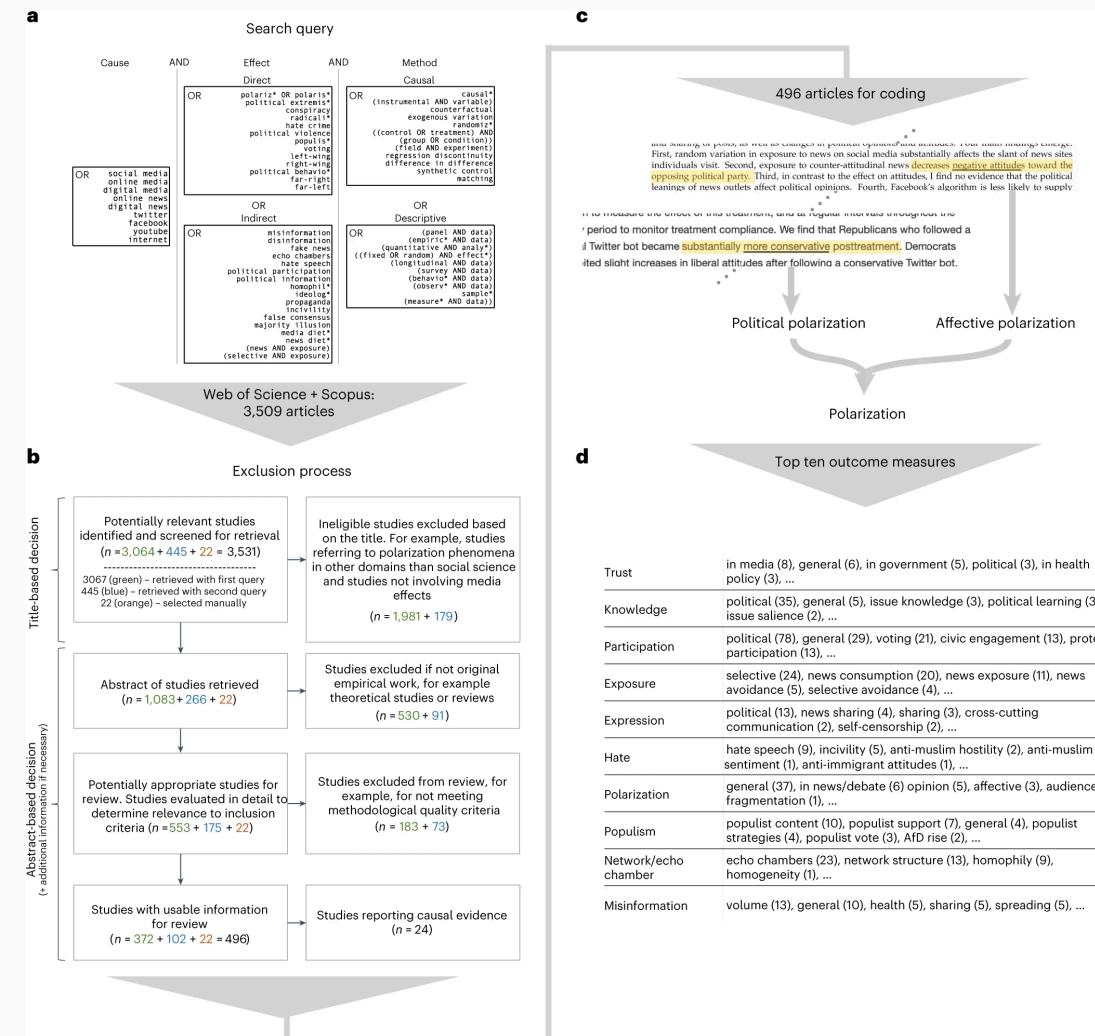
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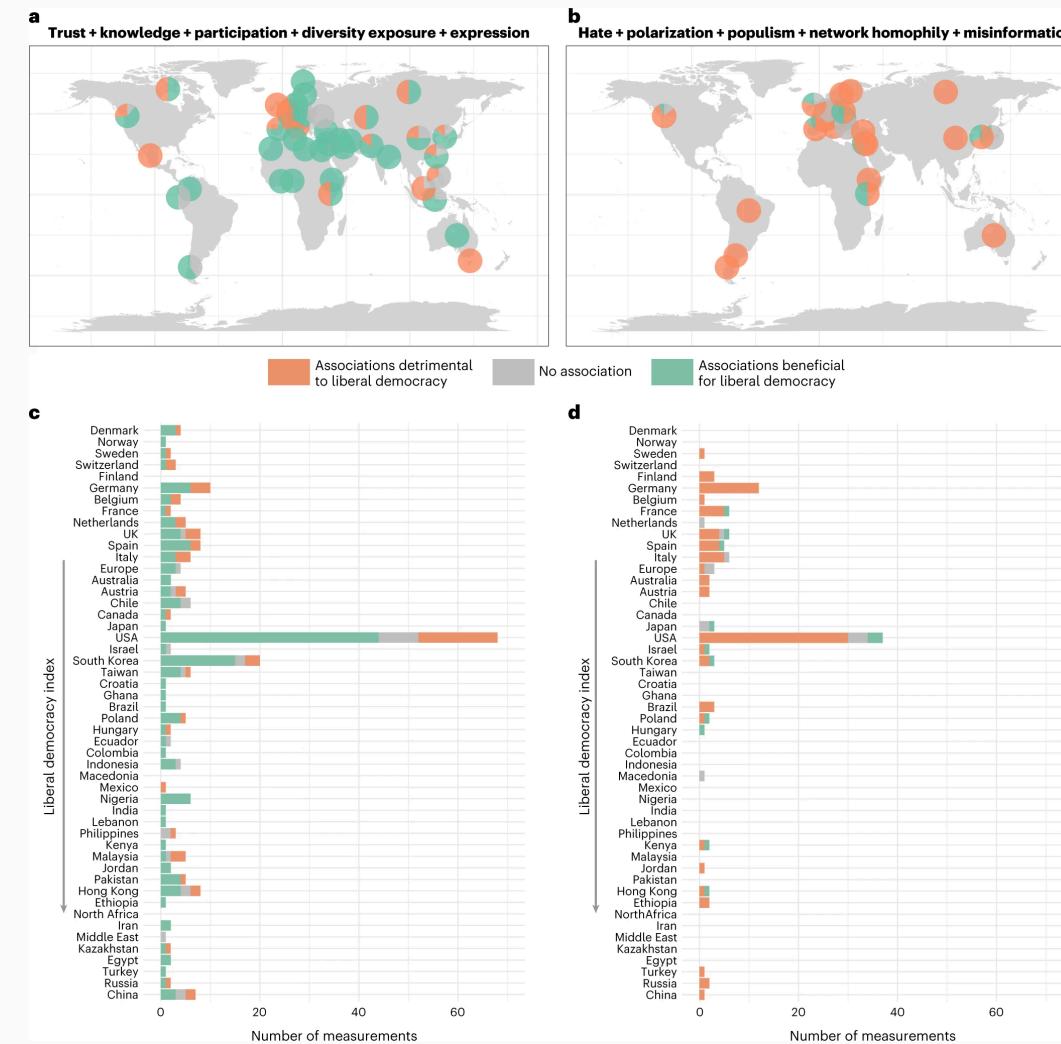
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# Systematic review (cont.)



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A review that is conducted according to clearly stated, scientific research methods, and is designed to minimize biases and errors inherent to traditional, narrative reviews.

## Expected output from the systematic review

- **Comparison with Existing Literature:** How the findings align or contrast with previous research.
- **Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy:** Potential impact on practice, policy, or further research.
- **Synthesis of Findings:** Aggregated data from the studies, which may include quantitative data synthesis (meta-analysis) or qualitative synthesis.

# **Meta-analyses: A primer**

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## What is a meta-analysis?

A particular flavor of systematic review, and statistical technique, conducted to combine the results of independent, but similar, studies to obtain an overall estimate of treatment effects.

## Important to consider

- All **meta-analyses** are based on a systematic review of the literature, but not all systematic reviews include a meta-analysis (i.e., the search strategy procedures align)
- During the process researchers need to consider the risk of missing unpublished studies, which might skew results (*File-drawer problem*)
- A big challenge for meta-analyses is the **standardization** of definitions of *variables* and *outcomes* across studies to ensure comparability

# Meta-analyses (cont.)



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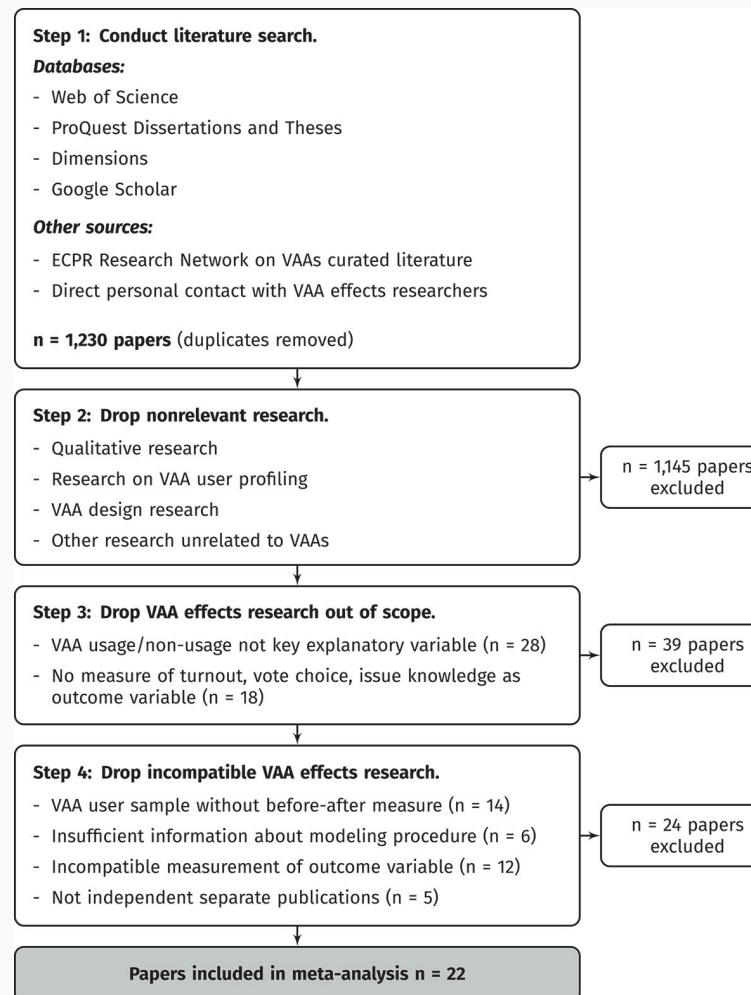
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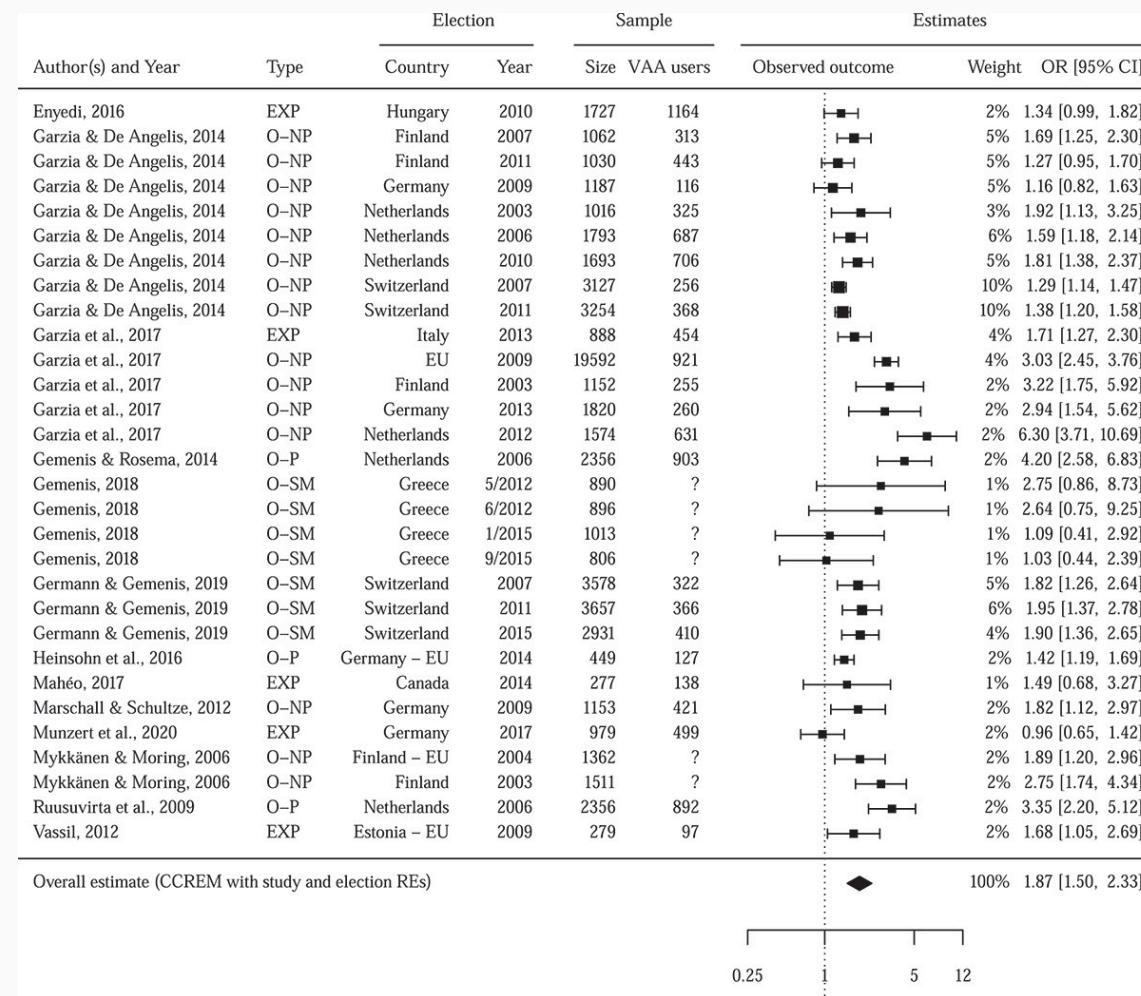
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# Meta-analyses (cont.)



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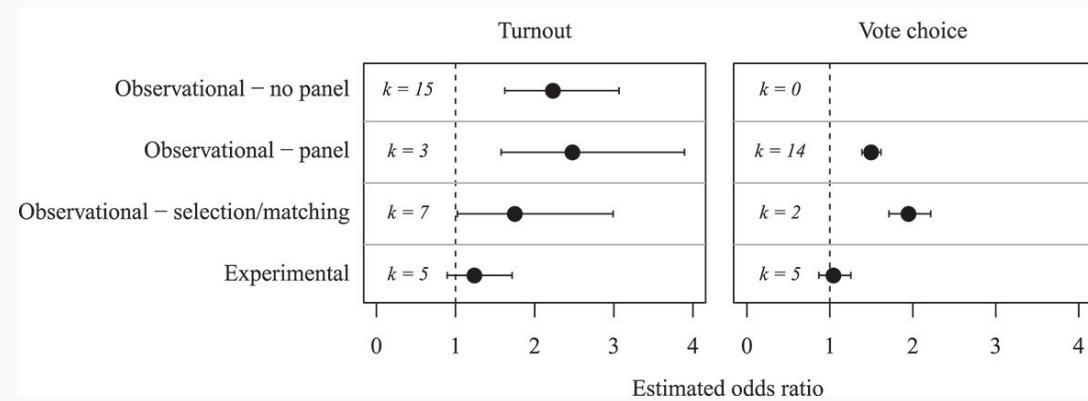
# Meta-analyses (cont.)



## Aggregate effects

Source (Munzert and Ramirez-Ruiz, 2021)

# Meta-analyses (cont.)



## Subgroup analyses (*nuance*)

Source (Munzert and Ramirez-Ruiz, 2021)

# Evidence synthesis for policy

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## Informed decision-making

- **Comprehensive Insights:**

Provides a thorough understanding of what works, what doesn't, and why.

- **Risk Reduction:** Minimizes the risk of implementing ineffective or harmful policies.

## Resource optimization

- **Efficient Use of Funds:** Can help allocate resources to initiatives backed by strong evidence, ensuring cost-effectiveness.
- **Avoids Duplication:** Can help prevent redundancy by identifying already existing research and practices.

## Accountability and transparency

- **Evidence-Based Justifications:**  
Can offer a clear rationale for policy choices, enhancing credibility and public trust.
- **Clear Communication:**  
Facilitates transparent communication with stakeholders about the basis for decisions.

## Adaptive policy-making

- **Stay Updated:** Keeps policymakers informed of the latest research and emerging trends.
- **Flexible Adjustments:** Allows for the modification of policies in response to new evidence.

# Why evidence synthesis matters for policymakers?

## Informed decision-making

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- **Risk Reduction:** Minimizes the risk of implementing ineffective or harmful policies.

## Resource optimization

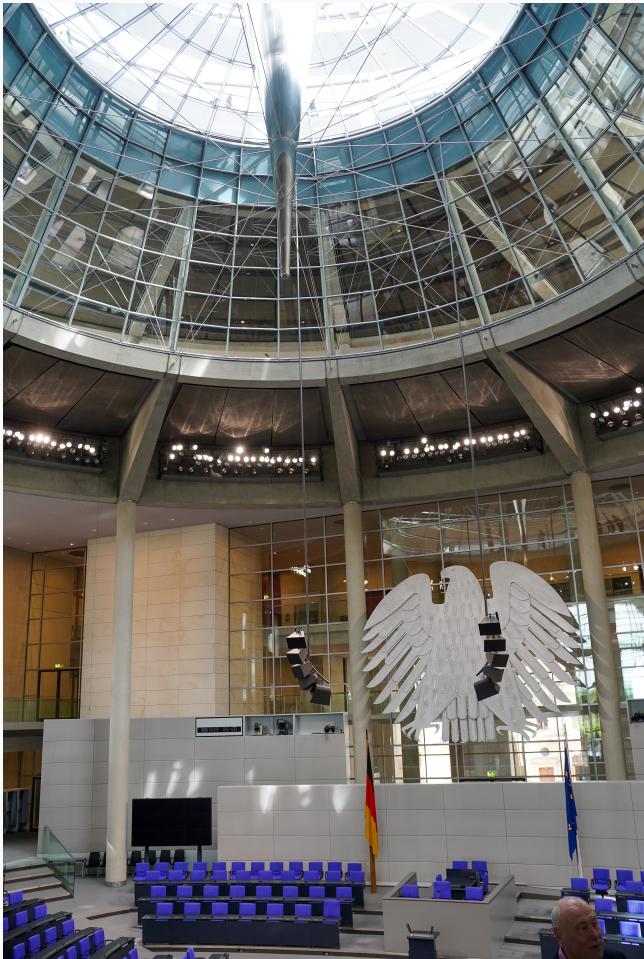
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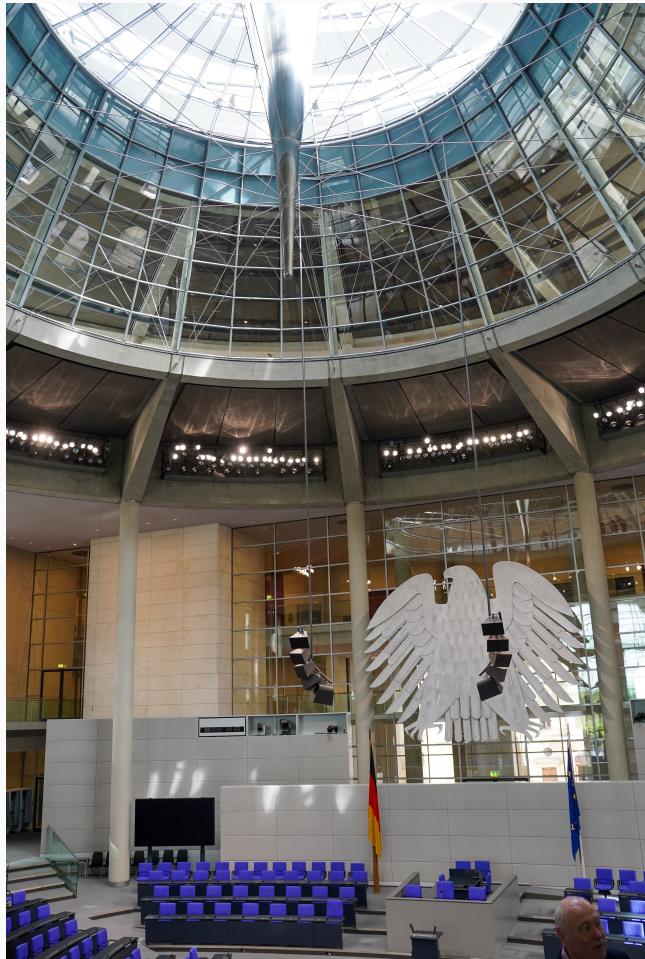
## History

The **Research Services in Parliament** (WD) was established in the early 1960s for legislative independence. It operates as a separate directorate within the Bundestag's administration.



## Roles and purpose

- **Service Providers:** Support Members of the Bundestag with academically sound information.
- **Knowledge Managers:** Ensure informed decision-making for legislation and government oversight.



## Principles

- **Audience specificity:** Tailor-made responses, from brief notes to in-depth studies.
- **Interdisciplinarity:** Addresses complex issues like energy policy through a multi-disciplinary approach.
- **Political Neutrality:** Non-partisan service, confidentiality maintained, equitable response to all members.



## Functions

- **On-Demand Research:** Custom research based on individual parliamentary requests and collaboration with external experts and institutions.
- **Proactive Briefings:** Produce dossiers on emerging political issues. As well as making materials accessible via their public platforms.
- **Topical Term Series:** Popular among parliamentarians, educators, and journalists.

## Coordinated trials

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## What are coordinated trials?

Coordinated trials involve multiple research sites working together under a common protocol to answer specific research questions, allowing for larger and more diverse study populations, and improving the generalizability of the findings.

## Key characteristics of a coordinated trial

- Clearly defined *research objectives* and hypotheses
- Standardized *protocols and procedures* across all participating sites to ensure consistency
- Centralized *coordination and management* to oversee the trial's progress and ensure compliance

- Rigorous *data collection and analysis* methods to enhance data quality and reliability
- Effective *communication and collaboration* among sites to address challenges and share findings
- Comprehensive *reporting and dissemination* of results to contribute to the broader scientific community

## The argument for it...

- **Collaborative Approach:** Emphasizes partnership between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.
- **Problem-Solving Orientation:** Focuses on identifying and addressing the root causes of crime and disorder.
- **Community Engagement:** Involves active participation of community members in crime prevention and public safety efforts.
- **Building Trust and Relationships:** Aims to foster trust, transparency, and mutual respect between police and community members.
- **Proactive Strategies:** Utilizes proactive strategies such as community outreach, problem-solving, and crime prevention initiatives.



There is mixed evidence about this approach to policing with a large focus on U.S. based studies

**Let's take a couple of minutes to read this policy brief**



# Coordinated trials (cont.)



# Questions?

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